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ABSTRACT

Sandra Cisneros is giving a voice to farm workers, migrant workers, and Latinos living in the inner cities across the United States in poems and short stories that call attention to gender, class, and race issues that many would prefer to ignore. While her women protagonists challenge destructive "machismo," which takes the form of spousal abuse, child abuse, and infidelity, Cisneros battles the machismo of an Anglo literary establishment that has more followers of Harold Bloom's cultural chauvinism than is generally acknowledged. While Bloom would insist literature should have no higher function than to create an aesthetic, Cisneros dares to believe that literature can help change the world, can call attention to the plight of the poor, and can even take on machismo. Her voice can help to empower minority students in the classroom. In Cisneros' most recent fiction "Woman Hollering Creek and Other Stories," the title story presents a battered wife and mother who dares to escape torment with the help of Felice, a female liberator in a pickup truck. The story offers a refreshing illustration of the independent woman doing well in a macho man's world. In one of Cisneros' books of poetry, "My Wicked Wicked Ways," there is melancholy and nostalgia about lost lovers. Confronting machismo is only one of her battles. According to Cisneros, Chicana writers are "the illegal aliens of American lit[erature]." But she and other writers of her generation are working to change all that. (TB)

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Russell D. Breshears

Battling Machismo in the Poetry and Prose of Sandra Cisneros

Sandra Cisneros is giving a voice to farm workers, migrant workers, and Latinos living in the inner cities across the United States in poems and short stories which call attention to gender, class and race issues that many in our country would prefer to ignore. While her women protagonists challenge destructive machismo which takes the form of spousal abuse, child abuse, and infidelity, Cisneros battles the machismo of an Anglo literary establishment that has more followers of Harold Bloom's cultural chauvinism than is generally acknowledged. While Bloom would insist literature should have no higher function than to create an aesthetic, Cisneros dares to believe that literature can help change the world, can call attention to the plight of the poor, and can even take on machismo.

The issue of machismo is a complex and sensitive one for Chicanos. Alfredo Mirandé and Evangelina Enriquez in their book La Chicana: The Mexican American Woman point out that all too often machismo has served as a useful myth for social scientists to perpetuate stereotypical depictions of Mexican-Chicano culture (13).

Octavio Paz asserts that the physical and spiritual conquest of Mexico gave rise to the cult of machismo.

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Unable to protect their women from the rape and plunder that accompanied the conquest, males developed an overly masculine and aggressive response to them. The cult of machismo is thus said to be a compensation for powerlessness and weakness, a futile attempt to prove one's masculinity (241).

Of course, many reject Paz's theory and Mirandé and Enriquez note that machismo cannot be uncritically accepted as a catchall that explains all the pathologies found in the Mexican and Mexican American family (109).

The stereotypical view of machismo has its complementary opposite in hembrismo. The macho is depicted as powerful, assertive, and dominant; the hembra as weak, docile, and submissive (116). Mirandé and Enriquez claim that anyone who has grown up in a Chicano home would scoff at the notion that the woman is weak, quiet or submissive (116).

Anyone who has read Sandra Cisneros would have to agree that her fiction and poetry is neither weak nor submissive. In Sandra Cisneros' The House on Mango Street Esperanza, a bright eleven year old girl, who seems much like Cisneros, encounters violent machismo while growing up in the hispanic quarter of Chicago. Esperanza (Spanish for Hope) observes the treatment of women in stinging vignettes like the following one:

> Rafaela Who Drinks Coconut & Papaya Juice on Tuesdays
>
> On Tuesdays Rafaela's husband comes home late because that's the night he plays dominoes. And then Rafaela, who is still young but getting old from leaning out the window so much, gets locked indoors because her husband is afraid Rafaela will run away since she is so beautiful

> to look at. Rafaela leans out the window and leans on her elbow and dreams her hair is like Rapunzel's. On the corner there is music from the bar, and Rafaela wishes she could go there and dance before she gets old. A long time passes and we forget she is up there watching until she says: Kids, if I give you dollar will you go to the store and buy me something? She throws a crumpled dollar down and always asks for coconut or sometimes papaya juice, and we send it up to her in a paper shopping bag she lets down with clothesline. Rafaela who drinks and drinks coconut and papaya juice on Tuesdays and wishes there were sweeter drinks, not bitter like an empty room, but sweet, sweet like the island, like the dance hall down the street where women much older than her throw green eyes and open homes with keys. And always there is someone offering sweeter drinks, someone promising to keep them on a silver string (79-80).

In the simple, poignant narrative of a child who cannot completely understand what she is witnessing, we see machismo represented in the outrageous actions of the husband who locks his private possession, a beautiful wife, in his apartment to prevent her from fleeing. Esperanza, unable at this point to do anything else to challenge this abuse other than name it, comforts this exiled hostage with coconut and papaya juice.

In the vignette, "What Sally Said" a young girl tries to excuse her father from beating her:

> He never hits me hard. She said her mama rubs lard on all the places where it hurts. Then at school she'd say she fell. That where all the blue places come from. That's why her skin is always scarred. But Sally doesn't tell about that time he hit her with his hands just like a dog, she said, like I was an animal. He thinks I'm going to run away like his sisters who made the family ashamed... One day Sally's father catches her talking to a boy and the next day she doesn't come school. And the next. Until the way Sally tells it, he just went crazy, he just forgot he was her father between the buckle and the belt. You're not my daughter, you're not my daughter. And then he broke into his hands (92-93).

Later readers learn that Sally stages a jailbreak marriage to an Anglo marshmellow salesman:

> Sally says she like being married because now she gets to buy her own things when her husband gives her money. She is happy, except sometimes her husband gets angry and once he broke the door where his foot went through, though most days he is okay. Except he won't let her talk on the telephone. And he doesn't let her look out the window. And he doesn't like her friends, so nobody goes to visit her unless he is working (101-102).

Sad but true to the pattern of victims of abuse, Sally trades her abusive Hispanic father for an abusive Anglo husband. Such women in literature and in real life remain victims. Their only chance is that little girls like Esperanza will grow up and empower them to challenge the abuse. Even though Esperanza wishes to flee the poverty of Mango Street, she realizes that she must one day return to the barrio:

> One day I will pack my bags of books and paper. One day I will say good bye to Mango. I am too strong for her to keep me here forever. One day I like go away. Friends and neighbors will say, What happened to that Esperanza? Where did she go with all those books and paper? Why did she march so far away? They will not know that I have gone away to come back. For the ones I left behind. For the ones who cannot come out (110).

Like Esperanza, Cisneros returned to the barrios to work for change, and she continues to work for change through her poetry and prose. She seems to embody Mirandé and Enriquez's definition of a Chicana feminist as one who "seeks to eradicate poverty and racism as well as sexism" (243).

In Cisneros' most recent fiction <u>Woman Hollering Creek and other stories</u> the title story presents a battered wife and mother who dares to escape the torment with the help of a female

liberator in a pickup truck:

> There wasn't time to think about anything but the pickup pointed toward San Antonio. Put your bags in the back and get in.
>
> But when they drove across the arroyo, the driver opened her mouth and let out a yell as loud as any mariachi. Which startled not only Cleófilas, but Juan Pedrito as well.
>
> Pues, look how cute. I scared you two, right? Sorry Should've warned you. Every time I cross that bridge I do that. Because of the name, you know. Woman Hollering. Pues, I holler. She said this in a Spanish pocked with English and laughed. Did you ever notice, Felice continued, how nothing around here is named after a woman? Really. Unless she's the Virgin. I guess you're only famous if you're a virgin. She was laughing again.
>
> That's why I like the name of that arroyo. Makes you want to holler like Tarzan, right?
> Everything about this woman, this Felice, amazed Cleófilas. The fact that she drove a pickup. A pickup, mind you, but when Cleófilas asked if it was her husband's, she said she didn't have a husband. The pick up was hers. She herself had chosen it. She herself was paying for it.
>
> I used to have a Pontiac Sunbird. But those cars are for viejas. (Old Ladies) Pussy cars. Now this here is a real car (Woman Hollering Creek and other stories 55).

Felice, the female liberator in the fast moving pick up, offers a refreshing illustration of the independent woman doing well in macho man's world in spite of the numerous virgins. Like Felice, Cisneros, too, owns a pickup truck. In a New York Times Book Review she jokes that her purchase of "a menstruation-red Nissan Truck" (6) helped convince her father that she really was a writer. She took her father along to shop for the truck, and when she bought the vehicle with the money she had earned as a writer, he began to accept his daughter's career (6). The battered woman Cleófilas in the story, like several of the female characters in Cisneros' prose, is so accustomed to being treated as a possession by a

father, a brother, or a husband that she longs for the independence that her own car or house would bring.

Esperanza in The House on Mango Street has these same longings:

> A house of my own. Not a flat. Not an apartment in back. Not a man's house. Not a daddy's. A house all my own. With my porch and my pillow, my pretty purple petunias. My books and my stories. My two shoes waiting beside the bed. Nobody to shake a stick at. Nobody's garbage to pick up after. Only a house quiet as snow, a space for myself to go, clean as paper before the poem (108).

As a writer and poet Sandra Cisneros has at last acquired that house of her own and has begun to furnish it with poems. In her most recent collection of poetry entitled Loose Woman published in 1994, the poet continues to struggle with macho men, but rather than becoming cynical, bitter or angry she uses humor to conquor even the most difficult man. Whether she's carousing in bars in poems like "Black Lace Bra Kind of Woman" or kicking the cowboy in the butt "who made a grab for Terry's ass" (105) in the poem "Las girlfriends" Cisneros is having a ball. She even takes her frivolity to the museum. In the poem "Los Desnudos: A Triptych" Cisnersos evens the score with male art world which has objectified women--particularly the female nude for centuries.

She begins her mischief with Goya's "Maja Desnuda":

> In this portrait of "The Naked Maja" by Goya
> I'll replace that naughty duquesa with you. And you
> will do nicely too, my maharaja.
> The gitano curls and the skin a tone
> darker than usual because
> you've just returned from Campeche
> All the same, it's you raised

with your arms behind your head
staring coyly at me from the motel pillows.

Instead of erotic breasts,
we'll have the male eggs to look at
and the pretty sex.
In detail will I labor the down
from belly to the fury of
pubis dark and sweet,
luxury of man-thigh
and coyness of my maja's eyes.

My velvet and ruffled eye will linger,
precise as brushstrokes,
take pleasure in the looking and look long.
This is how I would paint you.
In the leisure of your lounging
Both nude and naked to my pleasure
(86).

In this parody of a famous work of art, Cisneros succeeds in making her most macho readers admit that women can enjoy and oggle the male form with as much zeal as men can gaze at women. The humor comes from watching Cisneros paint her sensuous gypsy with a boldness equal to a man's. There's a healthy playfulness found in this poem. The fair duchess of Alba is replaced by the sun tanned gypsy; motel pillows have replaced the duchess's green velvet devan.

The poem continues with a second panel in the triptych featuring the revolutionary Zapata rising up from his bath to show off his back side, and concludes with a Mexican Venus at his toilet.

Cisneros' earlier book of poetry My Wicked Wicked Ways (1992) lacks much of the playfulness found in Loose Woman. There's a melancoly and nostalgia in these poems which feature lost lovers. "One Last Poem for Richard" illustrates this:

...Richard, it's Christmas Eve again
and old ghosts come back home.
I'm sitting by the Christmas tree
wondering where did we go wrong.
...After all the years of degradations,
the several holidays of failure,
there should be something
to commemorate the pain (62).

A similar tone can be found in the poem, "For a Southern Man"

Bill, I don't do laundry
and I don't believe in love
I believe in bricks.
And broken windshields.
And maybe my fist.
But you're safe to take
the road this one time, buddy.
I'm getting old

I've learned two things.
To let go
clean as kite string.
And to never wash a man's clothes.
These are my rules (64)

Although the women in Cisneros' prose and poems are often deceived by men, her characters seldom resort to acts of vengeance. While some of these women suffer at the abuses of macho men, they refuse to remain victims no matter what the circumstances. They dare to ask the question, Cisneros raises in the poem, "Tantas Cosas Asustan, Tantas" (So many things frighten, So many)

¿Cual es peor?
Estar siempre sola,
o estar con alguien para siempre? (102)

What is worse
To be alone forever
Or to be with someone forever? (My Wicked Wicked Ways 102)

As a writer Cisneros often describes herself as wife to no one and mother to no one. Confronting machismo is only one of her battles. According to Cisneros, Chicana writers are "the illegal aliens of American lit; the migrant workers in terms of respect" (Mother Jones 15). But Cisneros and other Chicana writers are working to change that. Just as her women characters triumph in spite of patriarchal cultures of machismo, Cisneros has triumphed too, and her triumph as a writer gives a voice to the Chicana and to all women who have been silenced by machismo in the past.

Voices such as that of Cisneros can do much to empower minority students in the classroom literature class. Not all American writers belong to the classical literary canon, but other voices deserve to be heard also.

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